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09. A Philosopher with a Sense of Humor

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Abstract

In this very short acknowledgment I think I'd like to accomplish two things. First, I'd like to give a sense of the affect that having seen Richard in action has had on me. Second, I'd like to point to an important development in philosophy of humor contributed by Richards in his work "A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor" which I believe needs to be central to the philosophical discussion of humor and joking going forward. [*excerpt*]

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A Philosopher with a Sense of Humor

Eugene Zaldivar

In this very short acknowledgment I think I'd like to accomplish two things. First, I'd like to give a sense of the affect that having seen Richard in action has had on me. Second, I'd like to point to an important development in philosophy of humor contributed by Richards in his work "A Philosopher Looks at the Sense of Humor" which I believe needs to be central to the philosophical discussion of humor and joking going forward.

To begin with Richard C. Richards, a name so great it earns the full allotment of its letters, is, I think, an example of what we should all aspire to as philosophers. I believe that we are all aware of the many noxious tropes in our field. For one there seems to be a sense that there must be an element of suffering in any graduate program that is worth a damn. That, in order to earn a PhD, you must be torn down and shredded. I never had the privilege of studying with Richard, but I cannot help but believe that he would have nothing to do with this way of doing things.

There is a second stereotype very common in analytic philosophy: the philosopher who believes that the only worthwhile response to a talk is to make the speaker regret having said anything at all. The philosopher who believes that a barely civil take-

down which displays the commenter's genius, for the mere pittance of humiliating the speaker, is the *raison d'être* of attending a conference. That toxic, hostility is too often displayed at conferences and even putatively friendly department colloquia. I have never seen it in Richard. Indeed, I have seen the opposite.

Richard invariably has kind things to say every time he offers any sort of comment. He is the epitome of the sort of philosopher we should all strive to be. He endeavors to support and enable his interlocutors. He is not interested in showing off how smart he is, but rather in helping everyone get a better sense of the idea being discussed. Of course, this does nothing to obscure just how smart he is. Even when he is indeed pointing to a significant problem, he understands that you don't have to demean a person's efforts when offering a critique.

It took me many years of attending LPS conferences alongside Richard (and the rest of the regulars) to see that this is a better way to do things. To see that philosophers can contribute to a field without indulging our destructive tendencies. I am grateful to him, and the LPS, for that lesson. I hope to live up to it.

I have had the privilege to comment on Richard's work twice during our time at LPS. I was also allowed to work as his oracle; I read Richard's comments on Steve Gimbel's book at the 11th

meeting of the LPS in 2017. That was the smartest I've ever sounded.

In working with Richard over the years it's hard to miss one of his central concerns: getting clear about just what the sense of humor is and what it is not. Humor as he has argued at different times is distinct from joking, laughter and cleverness. It is both an attitude and an intellectual exercise. It makes our liver better and it helps us to understand our world. More precisely, he defines it as the playful appreciation of incongruity. It seems to me that this is a good analysis. His arguments have won me over.

In a recent conference I suggested, half-jokingly, that we ought to have comedy appreciation courses just as we have courses in film, art and music appreciation. I am moved, more and more to take this as a serious goal. If we do develop these courses the curriculum will be incomplete without Richards.